

## Radical Middle Way Transcripts

### Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad during The Radical Middle Way Launch

*Bismillah, Alhamdulillah wa Salatu wa Salamu 'ala Rasulillah, wa alihi, wa sah'bahi, wa man wa'la.*

Let me start by telling you something I saw recently on a Hertfordshire estate agent's website. There was a house being sold, generally an indifferent 1920s structure, whose sole feature of note was that at the end of its garden it had an ancient chestnut tree. The chestnut tree, according to the estate agent had been dated by scientists to the early seventh century. Really ancient. That of course means that the tree is as old as our religion. So possibly planted perhaps during the life of our prophet (s#alla Allahu'alayhi wa sallam) and down the generations of Muslims through all the tempestuous events and all the great triumphs of our history, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the conquests, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans, the conversion of Java, that tree every year shed its leaves in the autumn, and gained them again in the spring.

Another tree is rather closer to where I am living at the moment, and it's a tree that grows in the courtyard of the mosque of Abu Ayyub Al Ansari (rad#i' Allahu 'anhu) in the city of Istanbul. And the tree has been there we know exactly since the year 1453, we know because the chroniclers report that it was planted by the hand of the city's conquer Sultan Mehmet II. And it's still there, and of course it's enormous. Seven or eight grown men could not embrace its girth. In recent years of course, the tree has needed a certain amount of help. Some of the branches have seemed dangerously close to falling so they have to be propped up. It was hit by lightning, and it had to be filled with cement. It's very ancient, but it still every year, bursts into leaf and provides an important sense of continuity with a past that many modern Turks seems increasingly remote and difficult to relate to.

Now there's a series of verses in the Qur'an which relate to the significance of the tree and its symbolic possibilities. Well known verses, Surah Ibrahim, A'uthu billahi min al-Shaytani al-Rajim. Bismillahi al-Rahmani al-Rahim

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ 14:24

تُؤْتِي أُكْلَهَا كُلَّ حِينٍ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ 14: 25

Which means something like: Have you not seen how Allah coins a metaphor, a good word is like a good tree whose root is firm, whose branches are in the sky. Every season it gives its fruit with the permission of its Lord. And your Lord coins metaphors for humanity that perhaps they may remember.

We have in Sahih al-Bukhārī a comment on this from sayidna Al Bara bin Aazib (radhi‘Allahu ‘anhu) in which the Prophet (salla Allahu‘alayhi wa sallam) explains that this does in fact refer to the kalimah of tawhid, the shahāda. The religion itself is like a tree. It has roots and branches. And the ‘ulama of fiqh lost no time in using precisely those botanical terms to describe the two great subdivisions of Islamic Law. The Usūl, the roots and the furū’ the branches. The Usūl, the sources; how do we derive nourishment from the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. And the branches, what are the implications of that nourishment for the way in which the shari‘ah and the Muslim life develops and provides shelter and nourish to human beings.

Now, the word radical that comes from a word, a root, that means a root precisely. That which is Islamic is in a sense obviously that which is radical because it is rooted. Our’s is a time when to be rooted in the past, to be part of an organic entity that goes back centuries has become the strangest and the most unusual thing. The normal condition of modernity is to be disconnected, to be uprooted, to be rootless, to be a nomad. The great gift of Islam, one of its great gifts, is that because its forms are unchanged, we are genuinely part of a living organism, that is nourished by roots that are sunk deep in the revelation of God and in a great age of faith. No other ummah can quite make this claim. You can go into any of London’s myriad places of worship and you will see thousands of different things. But generally if you want to see something that is truly unchanged from a great age of faith you will go to the mosque. The new pope has claimed that the great crises which are overtaking the Catholic Church, the fact that in many countries nobody wants to be a priest or a monk or a nun any longer, that much of Catholic Europe is effectively secularized. Problems of abuse of every unimaginable kind. He says it’s because we no longer have a consistent liturgy, form of worship. The crisis in the Church is a crisis in liturgy. Forty years ago they decided to get rid of Latin Mass and to allow local communities to worship in their own languages. And as it were, the tree was sliced off. Something new that inexorably was dominated by the brilliant mediocrity of modernity took its place. It will be very interesting to see whether this current papacy can heal the wound that was done to the catholic tree forty years ago.

But nobody has done that to the Islamic tree. Whatever the political, and economic, and strategic and often cultural mess of any given Muslim country, the forms of worship, the ‘ibadat are intact. You go into a mosque, you know roughly what you’re going to get. And this is possibly Islam’s greatest, perhaps most miraculous cultural achievement over the last hundred years. That alone it has passed into modernity with its fundamental forms intact and therefore can be a point for new growth and for renewal.

Nonetheless there are those who wish to prune the tree or encourage it in certain directions, and this is why we need expert gardeners. Something as magnificent as that is also quite vulnerable. A tree can be a mighty thing that gives shade and fruit to generations but it only takes a couple of men with axes and it is no more. That’s the responsibility of the ‘ulama. This is why they are truly the heirs of the ambiya, warathat al-Ambiya. Because while the process of wahi, of revelation, has certainly come to an end, nonetheless the tree is still growing. It was watered by sayyidna rasulillah (salla Allahu‘alayhi wa sallam) the one who planted it. It continues to need watering and nurturing and protection.

Now we are told that as time goes by, and indeed as the end times approach, scholars

will become fewer and its probably one of those markers of our times that whereas in the first few generations of Islam the ‘ulama were many and those who gave fatwas.were few. Today the ‘ulama, the real ‘ulama in a classical sense are few, but everybody is giving a fatwa. That’s our condition. People convert to Islam and ten days later they are telling you well this group is not right and this view is not correct and this tafsīr has a problem, ma sha Allah. That’s a sign of grave decadence. Now those people, when they look at the tree don’t quite know what they are looking at because they haven’t studied with gardeners who have been part of a tradition of maintaining that tree and its environment since it was planted. They don’t know its ways and they can be lethally dangerous. And the most dangerous amongst them are those who say the tree at its most vigorous and its most promising and its freshest and its best when it was really young. If it’s in trouble now, the branches are falling down, they need propping up and it’s not what it was, then the obvious solution is to cut the tree down to ground level and it will be as good as new. Cut the tree down and you go back to a time when Islam was new or when the sultan planted it in the company of his spiritual guide in 1453.

That’s the mark of the non-‘ālim, who thinks he understands the process of ijtihād. We need renewal, every Muslim accepts that. The religion has become old, dodderly, cantankerous. The sole source of renewal is that which was good for the earliest generations of this ummah, that’s established, nobody will deny it. But the difference between ‘ālim the and the amateur is that the ‘ālim says we’ll deal with the tree as it is, we keep it going, alhamdulillahwe still have it and over the years it has acquired a certain magnificence, that in itself has the right to be respected and enjoyed. The amateur scholar says no, the best thing is to cut it down and well be back in 1453 again, or indeed back at the time of the hijra, in the time of the prophet (SAWS). This is really what is at stake. We have a tree that is more intact than the trees of the other ummahs. But we have, given the nature of the age, an increasing proliferation of people who misunderstand it; who are not grateful for it, who can’t see its current beauty, who have not trained with those who have been looking after it, and think that the solution is actually to cut it down. The great calamity in our age is not that Islam needs a reformation, or that we need a liberal Islam, the great calamity is that we are not being true to our own traditions of scholarship.

The way to be true to the earliest generations of Muslims, is to be true to those who alone are authorized to teach the religion, because they have it had it from those, who have had it from those who have had it from those who actually held the hands of the saḥāba (radi’ Allahu ‘anhum). That’s the only way back. That is the rope that brings the bucket up from the well. Get rid of the rope and the water stays in the well. To say well the rope is something that was, well old, and we just need the water from the well. You won’t get water from the well that way, the only way to knowledge of fiqh and shari’ah and fatwa is through the authorized ‘ulama and through the four schools of fiqh, energized and made wise by a process of inner enlightenment of the kind that Sidi Mas’ud was telling us about.

And I think we all detect that we are living in momentous times. That we are living in times, when although sometimes unfortunately through lack of imān, faith I think we don’t acknowledge it, there are many very, very good things. A hundred years ago, Muslims were twelve percent of the world’s population, now we are twenty four percent and counting. Many of the things that were worrying Muslims a hundred years ago have actually been resolved. The intactness of our basic doctrines and

practices is our greatest achievement and alhamdulillah, it comes ultimately from Allah's desire that this ummah will not go astray in its forms, that it will always be acceptable, and accessible. وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

Wa Inna Lahu La Hafizun (12:12), that is from his guarantee to preserve the Qur'an that means that the interpretation will also be intact.

Alhamdulillah. By all historical standards, this has been a successful century or two. Considering the calamities that have befallen other ummahs, that might well have overtaken us. But at the same time, we know that this is a time in which there are fundamental crises, and challenges. And the challenges posed from within are the most threatening ones. Islam has proved impervious to attacks from without; it just becomes stronger. It became stronger as a result of the crusades. It was strengthened by the Mongol invasions. Each time it grew stronger. We learned something. We were made humble and Allah raised us up to another level. This time however, matters seem less clear because there are internal subversions. Subversions driven essentially by those people who say that the tree should be cut down so that things can be new again. So that we have the Islam of the first generation and all of the problems of the ummah will vanish like a mirage. That is the real threat.

Another threat which is often closely related to those same people, is the threat provided by those who mistake their own anger, for a righteous indignation and zeal for the defense of Allah's religion. The munafiq is afraid; he is terrorized. The believer is not afraid,

وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Wa la khawfun 'alayhim, wa la hum yah#zanun (2:262). The mark of the real believer, the wali' is that "he fears not, neither does he grieve." In other words he's not afraid really, of the future, neither does he grieve for the past. Because he knows future, past, it's all in the hands of and the decree of the One who is perfect in His disposition of history. The one who worries and the one who panics is the one who is not that wali' and is indeed possibly allied to the demonic forces: the awliya al-Shaytan. And his temper is one of fire and disturbance and agitation, a yearning for revenge, a defense of the self, a sense of outraged pride. That is the real subversion that religion faces today. Not external enemies, not conspiring superpowers, evil plots. Islam has dealt with that and worse in the past. The real threat that we are now facing that possibly can endanger the huge achievements that the ummah has been given in the past century or so, the real threat comes from this demonic phenomenon from within. The rage, the frustration, the fear, the jaza' the panic.

And every particular type of spiritual psychology has a precedent in the Qur'an and in the hadith. الَّذِينَ قَالَ لَهُمُ النَّاسُ إِنَّ النَّاسَ قَدْ جَمَعُوا لَكُمْ فَاخْشَوْهُمْ فَزَادَهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَقَالُوا حَسْبُنَا اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ (3:173)

Those who say people have ganged up on you, so be afraid of them. But it increased them in Imān. And they said Allah is enough for us and an Excellent Guardian. That's the one who's in this state of wilayah. He's relaxed, whatever the threats, he's relaxed because he trusts in the disposition of his Lord. He doesn't lash out in angry vindictiveness like the undisciplined child in the playground, who hits the boy who he is envious of, or whose one the conquer fight, or if he can't get hold him, bullies

someone younger than himself or finds somebody innocent to hit out at. No, Hasbuna Allahu Wa ni'mal wakīl, this is what he says. Allah is enough for us, and He is the best guardian, the Best Trustee.

This is the real challenge that the Muslim Ummah is facing, are we to be awliya of the shaytan, worshippers of the lower fiery possibility, slaves at the alter of anger, or are we to say, Hasbuna Allahu Wa ni'mal wakīl, trusting that Allah's intention towards this ummah is always unfailingly good. We need to ask ourselves this question, because if we get it wrong, then extremism results. Extremism that comes through simple despair of many Muslims, a kind of wandering away from religion now because, what a mess. That's a form of extremism, moving away from the tree of tawhīd.

The other extremism is to give way to the lower desires, revenge, anger, venting one's sense of outraged pride, which is a reversion to the days of the jāhiliyya. Remember the old suicide warfare of the pagan Arabs, the ittifād, one of the phenomona of the furious rage, the h'amiyya, of the people of the jāhiliyya, who couldn't stand it when their honor and their pride was challenged by others, was a ritual suicide on the battlefield and to show them that these people were not afraid of death. One of the jahili practices that were abolished by Islam. Unfortunately this practice has come back in some contexts, but it is alien to our tradition. Think of earlier ages of the occupation of Palestine for instance, however much we stretch our imagination, can we imagine somebody in the Palestine occupied by King Baldwin in the time of the crusaders, walking into the now substantially Christianized market place in Jerusalem and engaging in act of suicidal terrorism against the men, women and children there? Before explosives, how would one have done it? Blindfolding oneself perhaps and lashing out with a sword at whoever happened to be near. History of course, because our history is a history of futuwa, of honorable warrior-hood, records no such thing.

This is a decadence that is profound. And that it happens in the holy land is particularly worrying. Near the muqadsāt, where we are particularly required to conform entirely to the adāb of the Shari'ah. This is a deep subversion. And as for those who think that for reasons of masfahah that the door can be opened there, but somehow that door will remain closed elsewhere in the world, that this door can be opened because the Palestinians are so oppressed and somehow it's going to help them, but of course we keep it closed in Chechnya and Kahsmir and certainly in London, that logic doesn't seem to have worked too well. That rage, that desire to self annihilation, to lash out and the men, women and children, whoever in the vicinity, is now becoming a global epidemic. And the 'ulama who opened the little door now see these legions rushing through it in every place don't know what to do about it. That door has to be closed. Islam is too good for such practices, for such baseness, for such wild expression of futility and despair and vindictiveness.

Last year I was in Jerusalem and I spent some time looking at the new wall, one of the consequences of the suicide bombers. Then in the afternoon, I was visiting the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem who is a great upholder of Palestinian rights, and while I was there, the phone went. He picked up the phone and he found out that his nephew had died in a suicide attack. His nephew, a Christian Palestinian worked in a coffee shop in Jerusalem. Somebody, claiming to be a mujahid had walked in, pressed the button and had killed one Palestinian Christian, One Palestinian Muslim,

and two Israeli Jews and himself. This has nothing to do with futuwa. “Fa tabayanu” is the Qur’anic commandment. Be sure whose life you are taking.

This arbitrary brutality that has now come to the streets of this city and has caused such despair and confusion and division and battlement amongst Muslims and such joy and celebration amongst those who really wish we weren’t here at all. This has to stop. And we should have a policy of zero tolerance of those who try to fudge the issues, and say, well in some places it’s all right, but here it isn’t, because this is a moral absolute. The practices is qabeeh, it is ugly, and Allah is Jamīl yahibbu al-Jimāl. He is beautiful and He loves beauty.

So we ask Allahu (subhānahu wa ta’āla) to make us supporters of the true gardeners of this great tree that is the religion of Islam. To make us thankful that He has preserved this tree for us. And to helps us faithfully to protect it and to pass on its blessings and its joy and its shade and its fruit to our children and to subsequent generations. Wa salamu Alaikum wa rahmatullah.



## **Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad**

Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad is one of Islam's leading thinkers today. He graduated from Cambridge University with a double-first in Arabic in 1983. He then lived in Cairo for three years, studying Islam under traditional teachers at Al-Azhar, one of the oldest universities in the world. He went on to reside for three years in Jeddah, where he administered a commercial translation office and maintained close contact with Habib Ahmad Mashhur al-Haddad and other ulama from Hadramaut, Yemen.

In 1989, Shaykh Abdal Hakim returned to England and spent two years at the University of London learning Turkish and Farsi. Since 1992 he has been a doctoral student at Oxford University, specializing in the religious life of the early Ottoman Empire. He is currently Secretary of the Muslim Academic Trust (London) and Director of the Sunna Project at the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies at Cambridge University, which issues the first-ever scholarly Arabic editions of the major Hadith collections.

Shaykh Abdal Hakim is the translator of a number of works, including two volumes from Imam al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*. He gives *durus* and *halaqas* from time to time and taught the works of Imam al-Ghazali at the Winter 1995 Deen Intensive Program in New Haven, CT. He appears frequently on BBC Radio and writes occasionally for a number of publications, including *The Independent*; *Q-News*, Britain's premier Muslim Magazine; and *Seasons*, the semiacademic journal of Zaytuna Institute.

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